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MACEDONIA'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION

October 31 and November 14/December 5, 1999

**A Report Prepared by the Staff of the
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

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Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
234 Ford House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515-6460
(202) 225-1901
csce@mail.house.gov
http://www.house.gov/csce/

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The OSCE is engaged in standard setting in fields including military security, economic and environmental cooperation, and human rights and humanitarian concerns. In addition, it undertakes a variety of preventive diplomacy initiatives designed to prevent, manage and resolve conflict within and among the participating States.

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SUMMARY

On October 31, Macedonian voters went to the polls to choose a new president. Six candidates entered the contest, and the inability of any of them to win a majority of the votes cast required a second round on November 14 between the top two vote-getters. Boris Trajkovski of the ruling Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian Unity (VMRO-DPMNE) edged out his opponent, Tito Petkovski, of the opposition Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM), although irregularities forced second-round reruns on December 5 and were used by Petkovski supporters as a pretext for questioning the integrity of the result.

The election was a significant event, despite the limited powers of the presidential office in Macedonia, in that the winner would succeed the retiring Kiro Gligorov, who had held the office for the entire decade since multi-party politics was introduced in 1990 and independence from the disintegrating Yugoslavia was asserted in 1991. The election also was viewed as a test of this multi-ethnic country's stability in light of the NATO-Yugoslav conflict earlier this year regarding neighboring Kosovo, as well as Macedonia's own democratic development since the parliamentary elections of one year ago brought a new political coalition into power. The president has come to be viewed in Macedonia as a bridge between the country's ethnic communities. Ironically, the candidate of the previously nationalistic VMRO ran a campaign preaching tolerance, while that of the SDSM – the successor to the League of Communists – played heavily on anti-Albanian sentiment.

This election, from the campaign to balloting, took place under conditions that were incrementally more free and fair than previous Macedonian elections. This improvement, however, served partly to highlight those regions of the country where electoral problems traditionally occurred and did so again. In addition, while the participation of the sizable ethnic Albanian community in a country-wide election was viewed positively, the decisive nature of their overwhelming second-round vote for Trajkovski over first-round leader Petkovski produced potentially destabilizing social tensions, at least in the short term. Amidst street protests by Petkovski supporters claiming electoral irregularities in Albanian-inhabited parts of western Macedonia, the State Election Commission and the Supreme Court of Macedonia ruled that voting be repeated on December 5 at 230 polling stations. The outcome, however, was essentially the same.

While Macedonia may be continuing to move along the right track, these elections were a disappointment despite their generally good organization. Irregularities, whether alleged or real, have demonstrated that a comfortable balance between individual integration and collective segregation for ethnic communities has yet to be found, even though Macedonia as a whole has tried harder than most its neighbors in trying to find that balance and maintain peace. The international community can play a major role in helping all sides to find that balance in a democratic context, and in ensuring Macedonia's continued stability in a still unstable corner of Europe.

BACKGROUND

The Republic of Macedonia, with the city of Skopje as its capital, is a country of just over 2 million inhabitants in the south-central region of the Balkan peninsula, bordered by Bulgaria, Greece, Albania, Kosovo and Serbia proper, within a geographic region also called Macedonia that was wrested from the Ottoman Empire and divided by Greece, Serbia and Bulgaria during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13. The portion taken by Serbia was incorporated into the Yugoslav state established in 1918, and it received the status of a constituent republic as well as considerable economic support from within the reestablished Yugoslavia of Communist leader

Tito following World War II. Yugoslavia's violent disintegration in 1991 compelled Macedonia to assert its own independent statehood rather than remain in a truncated Yugoslav state dominated by Serbia. An OSCE Mission and a U.N. peacekeeping contingent were deployed in the country to deter the spillover of fighting elsewhere in the former Yugoslavia, but Macedonia's stability was threatened early on by the economic disruption of international sanctions placed on the new Yugoslav state as well as a blockade imposed by Greece, prompted by Greek fears that a Macedonia state would threaten its own territorial integrity. By the time the Dayton Agreement ended the Bosnian phase of the Yugoslav conflict in late 1995, the isolation of Macedonia had largely ended—especially with the acceptance of the "Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia" as an interim name acceptable to Greece—but the resurgence of conflict to the immediate north in Kosovo in 1998 and 1999, however, brought renewed concerns about Macedonia's external security.

Internally, Macedonia's traditionally pro-Yugoslav stance permitted the Social Democratic Union of Macedonia (SDSM) – the chief successor to the League of Communists which ruled the republic during Tito's Yugoslavia – to remain in power through a governing coalition which followed the first multi-party elections in November 1990. At the same time, the Macedonian people's own strain of nationalism was reflected in the founding and general popularity of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization ("VMRO," which was also the name of a 19th century extremist Macedonian liberation group), which, in fact, won more votes in the 1990 elections than any other single political party. Similarly, the many other ethnic groups comprising Macedonia's population formed their own, ethnically based parties. This included the sizable Albanian community – which comprises at least one-quarter of the country's population – as well as the smaller but still significant Roma, Serb and Turkish communities. The leading ethnically Albanian political party – the Party for Democratic Prosperity (PDP) – was invited into the governing coalition, and a prominent politician from the Tito era, Kiro Gligorov, was chosen to serve as President of the Republic.

Although of a more tolerant, reformed communist tradition, those who governed Macedonia as a result of the 1990 elections lacked strong democratic inclinations, while preoccupation with the external situation postponed serious consideration of domestic reforms. Thus, when parliamentary and presidential elections were held in October 1994, many of the same electoral problems from 1990 – voter registration lists, media bias and badly apportioned electoral districts – still existed, albeit not to such significant degrees that the outcome was brought into question by international observers. Moreover, by that time strains between the Albanian and Macedonian communities became more pronounced, with the founding of ethnically Albanian political parties like the Party for Democratic Prosperity of Albanians (PDPA) which were decidedly more separatist in their inclinations. The still nationalist VMRO-DPMNE (the additional initials standing for the "Democratic Party of Macedonian Unity" following splits in the original party) enlisted the support of some other parties in attempting to deny the elections any legitimacy by boycotting the second round. The ruling SDSM nevertheless was able to retain power, and Kiro Gligorov won a five-year term in the first directly elected presidential race.

By the October 1998 parliamentary elections, things had changed dramatically. First, while a conflict had already erupted in Kosovo to the north, the Dayton Agreement ending the Bosnian conflict had enhanced regional stability for about three years. This shifted the focus of public attention from national survival to economic recovery. Meanwhile, ethnic relations worsened somewhat in Macedonia, especially following efforts to block the opening of an unofficial Albanian-language university in Tetovo in 1996 and riots which followed the illegal raising of the Albanian flag over municipal centers in Tetovo and Gostivar in 1997. Rather than exacerbate tensions, however, the previously nationalist Albanian and Macedonian political parties found the espousal of extreme nationalism to win an election to be a futile exercise in Macedonia. Instead, they decided to form an electoral coalition with each other, brokered by a new, economically oriented party of intellectuals led by former

Yugoslav official Vasil Tupurkovski and called the Democratic Alliance (DA). In elections that were significantly more free and fair than their predecessors, this coalition successfully ousted the SDSM from power. As the SDSM had done with the PDP, VMRO-DPMNE invited the PDPA, which had merged with the ethnically Albanian Democratic Peoples Party to form the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), into the new government.

By the time the new governing coalition came into power, however, the situation in Kosovo eroded to the point that, only months later, the massive NATO air campaign put Macedonia in the precarious position of receiving hundreds of thousands of Kosovar refugees and assisting NATO in its operation against Yugoslav/Serbian forces immediately to the north. While fearing Belgrade as well, many Macedonians also sympathized with their fellow, Eastern Orthodox South Slavs to the north and feared the implications of an Albanian-run Kosovo for their own ethnically diverse country. In addition, the preoccupation with Kosovo left the new government of Prime Minister Ljupco Georgievski, VMRO-DPMNE's leader, with little ability to implement campaign promises, especially in the field of economic reform.

THE CONTEST

Macedonia maintains a parliamentary political system in which the prime minister, as head of government, effectively has more power than the president, as head of state. In the first years of independence, however, the president loomed large as a political force due to the role the office plays regarding national security, as well as high regard in Kiro Gligorov was held. By 1999, however, Gligorov's influence had waned. Age and an attempted assassination had taken their toll on his vigor. Still, the presidential office continued to be valued as a genuine representation of the Macedonian state, bridging all nationalities. In addition, with the 5-year presidential term expiring one year after that for the parliament, the 1999 election was viewed as a test of how popular VMRO-DPMNE remained after a challenging year in power.

Six candidates ran in the election. Originally, the VMRO-DPMNE coalition with the DA was based on the assumption that Ljupco Georgievski of the former would become prime minister with a victory in 1998 while the DA's Vasil Tupurkovski of the latter would be the coalition's candidate for president. After months of haggling, however, VMRO-DPMNE decided to field its own presidential candidate, Boris Trajkovski, who had come to political prominence as a Deputy Foreign Minister during the Kosovo crisis. Tupurkovski ran as the candidate of the Democratic Alliance alone. The SDSM, now in the opposition, chose Tito Petkovski, who had been the President of the unicameral Macedonian Assembly prior to the 1998 elections, as its nominee. Stojan Andov, who preceded Petkovski as Assembly President prior to his party's break with an earlier SDSM coalition, was the candidate of the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) which formed in 1997 from two other parties emerging from more reformist wing of the former League of Communists.

Finally, the Democratic Party of Albanians (DPA), a governing coalition partner, nominated Muharem Nexhipi as its candidate while the PDP nominated Muhamed Halili to vie for the votes within the ethnic Albanian community. This community, in fact, represents almost an entirely separate polity in Macedonia, yet the participation of the two candidates indicated a willingness of the community to consider the head of state their representative and not that solely of those of Macedonian nationality.[1] Indeed, given predictions of a divided vote for the

[1] This is a significant point given the fact that Macedonia remains a state founded as a homeland of the Macedonian nation and, at times in the mid-1990s, the leaders of Macedonia's Albanian community seemed to move increasingly toward separatism.

other candidates, Albanians in Macedonian felt empowered by the possibility of being an almost certain swing vote in an anticipated second round between the top two candidates, even though neither Albanian candidate was likely to be one of them.

The campaign period went relatively smoothly. Despite changeovers in the state-run broadcast and print media in early 1999, as well as the plethora of vague and overlapping media laws and regulations, coverage was viewed as reasonably fair, with enhanced diversity provided by several independent media outlets. There reportedly was some greater and better-timed coverage of Boris Trajkovski of the ruling VMRO-DPMNE on Macedonia Radio and Television (MRTV). Campaign adds were aired, and a candidate debate was organized. Similarly, the candidates and their political parties were able to use designated advertising space for their posters, although, as usual, posters were plastered just about anywhere. The candidates could, and many did, hold rallies in downtown Skopje and around the country. There were a few reported incidents during the campaign, but none were of major significance.

Trajkovski portrayed himself as representing continuity and stability in Macedonia, arguing that a president from the governing coalition leader would ensure progress. Tupurkovski, with a more humorous tone, took a similar line except, rather than associating himself with the ruling coalition, he focused on the need for economic revitalization and reached out more to the ethnic communities, especially Roma. Petkovski, in contrast, played off his name by espousing five ("pet" in Macedonian) principles and expressed anti-Albanian sentiments generated by a views that VMRO-DPMNE had, since coming to power, compromised Macedonian interests vis-a-vis both Albanian and Bulgarian interests. Andov, whose campaign was significantly smaller, played on these same sentiments, especially in regard to Macedonian fears of the implications of a potentially independent Kosovo for their own country's unity. The Albanian candidates, for their part, barely engaged in a public campaign, as the DPA was viewed as having taken most of the support of ethnic Albanians from the struggling PDP, while having no hope of getting votes from beyond the Albanian community which would be necessary to advance to the second round.

THE FIRST ROUND

The first round of the election was held on October 31. To be conclusive, one of the six candidates had to receive the majority of votes cast, and the voter turnout had to exceed 50 percent.

While the country as a whole could be considered one electoral district in the presidential race, administratively the country was divided into 85 districts, with a district election commission overseeing the polling stations in each one. Above the district commissions was one State Election Commission. The State Election Commission and district commissions were led by judges from the Supreme Court and Appeals Court respectively. Political parties were allowed representation on the commissions and polling committees, although the division of seats between ruling and opposition parties necessitated some creativity to accommodate shifts in the makeup of the governing coalition. The parties were also entitled to have observers at polling stations on election day, as were certain domestic civic organizations. More than 150 foreign observers were present for election day under OSCE auspices.

Generally speaking, the conduct of the polling committees on election day was good. The voter registers were largely accurate. There were about 37,000 newly registered voters since the parliamentary elections one year earlier, which had not been explained publicly from the beginning and caused some concern about fraud

which did not actually appear to have occurred. The 2,973 polling stations were scheduled to open at 7:00 a.m and remain open until 7:00 p.m. For the most part these hours were observed, although there were a few reports of early closings based on the claim that everyone registered to vote had voted.

The polling committees largely followed the instructions they received. Perhaps the most common problem was a voter who did not have a voter card, the presentation of which was required even if the prospective voter had other identification and was on the voter register. Less frequent were cases when the prospective voter had the voter card but no other identification. Both were needed, and the voter rather than any official was at fault for not having both. Indeed, local offices of the Ministry of Justice were open on election day for those who had neglected to pick up their voting cards. In most cases, those who were missing one or the other were not allowed to vote, although there is some reason to believe that the rules were less strictly enforced when foreign observers were no longer present at the polling station.[2]

There were cases of family voting. Such group voting is frequently seen in elections in the region, and does not indicate any intent by one of the competing parties or candidates to manipulate the results. That said, it does disenfranchise some individual voters, often women, of their right to a free choice secretly made, and, after a decade of multi-party elections, one would expect the practice to virtually cease. In many instances, attempts to vote as a family or a group were broken up by the polling committee, but it was likely tolerated when foreign observers were absent.

Voter turnout was good for the first round; 65.2 percent of the 1,610,338 registered voters cast ballots. Given the relative simplicity of the election, and liberal rules allowing ballots to be valid as long as the voter's preference was clear, there were few invalidated ballots. The results were as follows:

Candidate	Percentage of Votes Cast
Tito Petkovski (SDSM)	32.7
Boris Trajkovski (VMRO-DPMNE)	20.9
Vasil Tupurkovski (DA)	15.6
Muharem Nexhipi (DPA)	14.8
Stojan Andov (LDP)	10.6
Mohamed Halili (PDP)	04.3
Invalid Ballots	01.0
Total	99.9

The results were not surprising in that there would be a second round between Petkovski and Trajkovski. Nevertheless, the size of Petkovski's lead, and Tupurkovski's strong showing were considerably more than expected. Irregularities were reported, especially by Tupurkovski's DA and Halili's PDP, but , rather than repeating the first round, it was hoped that election authorities would concentrate on those problem areas to ensure that what would likely be a more tense second round would be run more smoothly.

[2] In at least one polling station observed by the Commission staff, a voter was asked to come back later after the OSCE observers had gone.

THE SECOND ROUND AND RERUN

While Petkovski had a sizable first-round lead, it was clear that the ethnic Albanian vote would go overwhelmingly for Trajkovski. Trajkovski, of course, had no guarantee that the Albanian community would participate fully in the second round, but the real quest for both candidates was to obtain the vote of Tupurkovski and Andov supporters. Both were somewhat unpredictable, given their past with the same League of Communists from which the SDSM emerged, as well as their shaky coalition relationships with VMRO. Neither specifically endorsed a candidate. Tupurkovski argued instead that it was democratic for citizens to exercise their right not to vote at all, indicating that he might try to keep voter turnout below 50 percent and reenter the race when a whole new set of elections would be required. When the DPA's Arben Xhaferi announced that he felt Albanians should participate in second-round balloting, that scenario seemed unlikely. Andov supporters were predicted to vote mainly for Petkovski, given the anti-Albanian sentiments upon which both candidates played.

The two-week campaign for the second round remained as open and fair as for the first round, albeit more vigorous as the two candidates competed for the votes of those who had supported other candidates. The November 14 election day was largely similar to its first-round counterpart, except that in the same problem areas of western Macedonia irregularities were not eliminated but magnified, with widespread reports of polling committees essentially committing election fraud. Some OSCE observers reported examples of turnouts at some polling stations from one time of day to another that could only be explained by ballot box-stuffing. Extremely high turnouts at some stations also raised suspicions; in some places the number of votes cast reportedly exceeded registered voters. The OSCE reported many instances of proxy and multiple-voting. The OSCE Election Observation Mission nevertheless stopped well short of claiming that the irregularities would bring the results into question.

The turnout for the second round remained high, at 69.9 percent, indicating that not only did supporters of first-round candidates come out to vote for an alternative, but that some people may have, in fact, waited to make the real choice between the top two candidates. Voter fraud could also have contributed to some increase in the turnout. Preliminary results indicated that Boris Trajkovski had edged out Tito Petkovski, and tens of thousands of Petkovski supporters filled the streets of Skopje the day after the elections to protest the irregularities they claimed to have occurred. Official complaints were lodged regarding 249 polling stations. After having to postpone its work because of the shouting of demonstrators outside, the State Election Commission originally approved holding reruns in 31 polling stations, but, on November 28, this number was increased to 230 after the Supreme Court intervened to review the outstanding cases. The reruns were scheduled for December 5. The number of votes at stake exceeded 150,000, while Trajkovski's second-round victory was with 52.8 percent of the voted compared to Petkovski's 45.9 percent, a difference of only about 70,000 votes.

Tensions rose, as Petkovski supporters, hoping to overturn the result, reportedly chanted "Traitors! Thieves! Are the Albanians going to elect our President?" in their protest marches. Macedonian Albanian leaders criticized the rerun, which implied that they attempted to commit election fraud, but they urged their supporters to return to the polling stations again. The reruns were held, and the results confirmed the Trajkovski victory by about the same number of votes. Further irregularities, albeit on a much smaller scale, were reported, including ballot stuffing and multiple voting. Petkovski's post-election positions seemed both to accept losing the race and to question the legitimacy of the result at the same time. The SDSM, for example, boycotted the December 15 presidential inauguration ceremonies. Trajkovski, for his part, pledged to represent all citizens of Macedonia, regardless of ethnicity, saying that he will "not allow ethnic hatred and intolerance to undermine Macedonia's stability."

CONCLUSION

Macedonia's electoral performance has always been more even-handed and open than most of the former Yugoslav republics, and the 1999 presidential elections represented further progress in reaching the free and fair benchmark to which all OSCE States must strive. Indeed, while the second-round reruns indicated irregularities, the fact that election officials and courts recognized the problem and sought to deal with was a positive sign. Indeed, some felt that they went farther than legally needed in order to placate a disgruntled opposition.

That said, these elections were also a major disappointment, reflecting the continued existence of tensions between the two main ethnic communities that had seemed to be easing. Moreover, from an electoral standpoint, the repetition of problems at polling stations in some areas should have been anticipated and corrected effectively. Had that action been taken, Macedonia's image abroad would have been enhanced greatly.

If Macedonia is to move forward, ethnic Macedonian citizens must accept the fact that ethnic Albanian citizens have equal rights, including the right to choose who will be the head of state. The difficulties Macedonians have faced in obtaining their own recognition can explain why this may be difficult, but these difficulties also should encourage Macedonians not to act in the same way as many of their neighbors have. A good example might be another former Yugoslav republic, Montenegro, where ethnic Albanian and Bosniac minorities were key to Milo Djukanovic's second-round victory over first-round leader Momir Bulatovic in 1997. Similarly, ethnic Albanian citizens of Macedonia must not only seek the integration they claim to desire, but to do so in a civic manner. The irregularities observed seemed to indicate that it was not enough for ethnic Albanians simply to vote for the candidate of their choice; local election officials had to demonstrate their contempt for the rival candidate in a way that, in the end, detracted from the legitimacy of their candidate's victory and possibly validated some of the sentiments expressed by rivals.

These elections will have repercussions. The strong first-round showing of the DA and DPA relative to the VMRO-DPMNE candidate have led to a restructured governing coalition, and could still contribute to its demise. In the longer term, the damage done to ethnic relations by these elections could lead to greater difficulties. It is clear that the international community can work to maintain stability and promote democratic progress in Macedonia, by its presence and expression of support for the country. Despite its problems, Macedonia can remain the exception to the rule of violence and hatred which has plagued so many of its neighbors.

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